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# Rhetorical alternatives of free verse: A spatial perspective

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# RHETORICAL ALTERNATIVES OF FREE VERSE: A SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE

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A Thesis

Presented to the

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California State University,

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

in

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ABSTRACT

A great extent of this thesis is concerned with defining spatial-typography as used by many free verse poets. This type of spatial rhetoric is used in tandem with the verbal rhetoric of the poem, and occasionally it is even used apart from the verbal rhetoric to set the stage for the verbal which is to come. Examples are cited from the work of Apollinaire, Moore, Cummings and Thomas.

To demonstrate the way in which spatial-typography may interplay with a poem's literary foundation, a poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti is analyzed on a verbal level and then with respect to its spatiality.

One chapter is devoted to the possible use of spatial-typography in college English composition/rhetoric. Conclusions are drawn to connect these case studies to the typographic-spacial principles outlined in earlier chapters.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

As the stanza, line, metric foot or even syllables are used as units in traditionally structured poetry, the definitions of unit in typographic-spatial free verse are seemingly up to the poet's discretion. Subject matter and semantic tenor or tone are less frequently prescribed for free verse than for many forms of traditional poetry. This gives increased possibilities for the free verse poet to diverge from the traditions of poetry using more prescribed structures. In my analysis of select samples of typographic-spatial free verse, one of the rhetorical tools that stands out is the way in which the words are placed on the printed page. The typographic-spatiality is used to develop patterns, set a mood, establish trenchancy or dictate the pace at which the work is intended to be read.

In researching this, I found that many writers and critics have commented on typography or spatiality in free verse, but usually only commented on it as opposed to much, if any, analysis. Also, since much of typographically-arranged poetry may have an obvious visual effect on the reader, typographic-spatial poetry at large has been ignored. In the '60's, typographic-spatiality was analyzed in great length by Charles Olson, Richard Kostelanetz and others, but that analysis was usually limited to its use in

concrete poetry. Concrete poetry differs from free verse in that concrete poetry is not expressed in the words but solely in the appearance of the words, typographic characters or symbols on the page. In the second chapter, I have brought together many of those "comments" on typography and spatiality and tried to build an effective definition for the spatial perspective that I have assumed.

In the third chapter, I have made an attempt to illustrate the multi-level understanding possible with typographic-spatial free verse. I've used a poem from Lawrence Ferlinghetti's A Coney Island of the Mind, and through reader-response criticism I've tried to build a base from which to view the spatial aspects of the poem. The "base" I have built is a foundation of literary, organizational and logical analysis. This literary analysis makes the typographic-spatial rhetoric stand out more obviously.

The fourth chapter was a windfall which came out of a few "experimental" freshman composition assignments. I found that several of my students were helped to understand different aspects of both composition and the precise meaning of the language used or the rhetoric thereof through the use of typographic-spatial free verse.

Through the work involved in the researching and compiling of this thesis, I have redefined many of my own

thoughts about free verse. I have also been able to see that the techniques of typographic-spatiality used in some free verse can alter the way in which the poetry is viewed by the reader. This seeing things in a different way is not simply interesting, but it proposes both logical and practical ways in which to communicate an understanding of that rhetoric and its use.

The visual rhetoric of the typographic-spatiality is such an influential device that in some of the examples I chose to use the individual poet has put a majority of the semantic weight on the poem's spatiality. In some cases, even a poem of less literary merit may still convey certain aspects of the poet's intended message/subject/proposition.

## CHAPTER 2

## A DEFINITION

In 1965, Oscar Mandel wrote, in the Antioch Review,

> The task of poetry, in the past as now, was to take an interesting proposition (it might be a story, a wish, a quip, or an idea) and then to "charge" it with excitement by the use of any or every verbal or rhetorical device which experience has shown capable of creating emotion in the reader.[1]

He calls this "the very definition of poetry."[2] Prior to the advent of free verse, using "any or every verbal or rhetorical device" to produce this charging was not truly the case. "Any or every verbal or rhetorical device" was usually limited to that which could be expressed in accepted forms. In fact, the traditional forms of poetry were an integral part of the art work. When broken down, Mandel's "interesting proposition" is hardly a "definition." As a definition of poetry, Mandel's proposition is inadequate at best, and it creates an almost limitless source of new terminology needing definition, which follows. If poetry is to "charge" a story or a quip, there is already something verbal to begin with, and verbal rhetorical devices might naturally follow to enhance the work of the poet. If the poet is to "charge" a wish or an idea, nothing verbal is given to set a precedent. An idea taking the form of an

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[1]Oscar Mandel, "Why Poetry?," Antioch Review 25, (1985): 239.

[2]Ibid. 239.

image or a feeling would possibly be difficult to express in terms of formal language--even in terms of verbal rhetoric. However, Mandel was careful not to refer to verbal rhetorical devices; he referred to the devices that are "capable of creating emotion in the reader" as verbal or rhetorical devices. Giving even more license to the poet, Mandel broadened the field from which the poet may draw his poetic devices from that which is verbally expressible to that of the poet's own experience, not specifying that that experience need be verbal. From this point, charging an "interesting proposition" with excitement is not necessarily the composition of poetry within the limits of tradition.

If this is the "task of poetry," then the shift from prose to poetics necessitates a shift in visual structure, simply to highlight its charged content, causing it to stand out visually and let the reader know that it is poetry. Thus, in traditional poetry, we see the use of line and stanza forms. These poetic structures may provide for the reader a certain ease in reading by each line having a prescripted number of stressed and unstressed syllables or by each line rhyming in an adopted pattern. If these poetic structures only distinguish the poetry as different from prose, then the poet has reached one desired result. The poet has augmented the primarily aural-visual structure of the poetry with a spatial technique that alerts the reader

immediately to expect a different type of content. The poet has successfully conveyed to the reader an expectation in regard to genre. On a basic level, the reader is being told that the piece of writing is a poem. If the poet is consciously striving to say something with the poem's spatiality then form cannot be "arbitrary."[3] The poet has used one of several possible techniques to establish this expectation. Once again, the composition of the printed page offers itself to the writer as a vehicle through which he may establish expectations, of not only genre but of content as well. The reader can see the visual rhetoric of the poem and therefore expects the verbal rhetoric to follow suit. A poem that does not visually appear like traditional poetry will cause the reader to expect something unique in content as well.

Not only can the spatiality of the poem charge the poem with <u>emotion</u>, but it can charge the poem (for the reader) with a deeper, sometimes unconscious, sense of the poem's meaning. By simply the work's visual appearance to the reader, the first impression of the work is made. A poem in which the first lines go from left margin to the right margin and the following lines become shorter progressively while still being centered may give the reader a sense of pulling together; this might be used to establish definition

[3]Paul West, "Poetic Form Today," <u>English</u> 13 (1960): 8.

or precision. Also, a poem with generous spacing, apparently arbitrary indentation and few words in each line could bring with it a feeling of confusion or disarray. Writing needn't even be read to begin the visual rhetoric of the writing. A skilled poet can use this type of rhetoric consciously to help him convey that which may not be verbal. If as Charles O. Hartman claims, the language of poetry is "an act of attention,"[4] then the use of spatiality to augment the verbal rhetoric of the poem makes that poetry even moreso "an act of attention." Visual rhetoric stands out, if for no other reason, because it is <u>seen</u> by the reader. Were the poem read aloud, this type of rhetoric would seem to be useless in having an effect on the listener; however, it would still have its effect on the reader, quite possibly altering the way in which it is read aloud to the listener.

Spatiality being added to the writer's cache of rhetorical devices gives the writer an added dimension to use in communicating thoughts. This complements the writing much as blocking complements drama or gesture complements speech. Richard Kostelanetz asserts that "the great twentieth-century theme" of poetry is that "of expanding the

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[4]Charles O. Hartman, <u>Free Verse, An Essay on Prosody</u>, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 12.

language of human communication."[5] Used by the deaf and being based on the English language, American sign language has become a language all its own centering its meaning on visual expression rather than placing sole definition on the actual words. Much as the deaf rely on subtle, visual rhetoric, the free verse poet can also rely on visual rhetoric to convey meaning beyond/in addition to the word alone.

Paul West casts some doubt on spatial free verse being an avenue through which Kostelanetz's expansion of the language might be best made:

> One function of stanza form is to confer upon a poet's lines an air of finality and inevitability. A poet writing free verse will often find that his line endings lack significance and trenchancy. Where all is untraditionally arbitrary, much may seem to be done without sufficient visible reason. In other words, the poet must distinguish clearly in his own mind between sanctioned practice and private whim.[6]

Spatial free verse gives the poet an opportunity to define the meaning as well as the boundaries of practice and whim for his own individual purposes. The poet may even choose to operate outside his own boundaries, in an attempt to use what appears to be whim in such a way as to make an even bolder statement than what could be made in more narrow

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[5]Richard Kostelanetz, "Innovative Literature in America," The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982) 402.

[6]West 8.

confines of what is sanctioned. E. E. Cummings' poem "52" is a case where the words themselves might lack finality and inevitability. Cummings begins with a question regarding the lady's fingers, then he breaks off into an abstract metaphor personifying the lady's fingers and finally changes the subject of the question from the fingers to the lady herself. With such an economy of words, "52" has only the spatiality of the poem to convey both its finality and inevitability; the way the poem appears on the printed page contains the needed rhetoric.

52

why

do the
fingers

of the lit
tle once beau
tiful la

dy(sitting sew
ing at an o
pen window this
fine morning)fly

instead of dancing
are they possibly
afraid that life is
running away from
them(iwonder)or

isn't she a
ware that life(who
never grows old)
is always beau
tiful and
that nobod
y beauti

ful ev
er hur

ries[7]

The lines of the poem gradually lengthen from three spaces (line 1) to 19 spaces (line 13). When they begin to get shorter again, it is no surprise to the reader the poem ends with a four-space line (line 25). Whether or not the reader is conscious of the expectation, they have seen it expressed by the typography, and it does change the way in which they understand the poem.

Not only is there "sufficient visible reason" for Cummings to put his poem on the page in the way he puts it, but the reason is <u>for</u> the reader's reaction to what is seen on the page. He has used a type of "horizontal minimalism" to put the semantic weight on each word. He dismisses even the formal syntax and establishes trenchancy by giving the reader lines that gradually become shorter as they reach the end of the poem.[8] Furthermore, much of spatial analysis often takes on its meaning in conjunction with, or built upon, the work's literary underpinnings. Cummings has used his words to present the reader with an image and then has used the spatiality of the page not to change it but to punctuate it.

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[7]E. E. Cummings, "52." Complete Poems 1913-1962, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1968) 724.

[8]Kostelanetz 403.

Poetry is a dynamic art form (which is to say that new styles and other developments are constantly adjusting the free verse, poetic spectrum). Because of poetry being a constantly evolving genre, the poet may use a style like spatial free verse and make it his or her own. Wesley Dodd elaborates on the art of poetic form by saying,

> For the poet--the person making the gesture of the spirit that is poetry--writing a poem is always a search for adequate form, a search for what will embody that dense experience/perception/urge/ ultimatum that the throat and tongue are attempting to say. What I am referring to with the phrase "adequate form" is nothing less than the actual, finite presence in the poem of the totality of content that a moment of human experience contains.[9]

If Dodd's assertion that writing a poem is part of a poet's search for "adequate form," then Ted Hughes' poem, "The Warm and the Cold," is an excellent example. In "The Warm and the Cold," Hughes combines traditional rhyming structure with a complementary spatial structure. The expression that he makes with this poem has used visual rhetoric to augment the verbal rhetoric.

The Warm and the Cold

Freezing dusk is closing
  Like a slow trap of steel
On trees and roads and hills and all
  That can no longer feel.

But the carp is in its depth
  Like a Planet in its heaven.
And the badger in its bedding

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[9]Wayne Dodd, "And the Look of the Bay Mare Shames Silliness Out of Me," Ohio Review 28 (1982): 36-44.

Like a loaf in the oven
And the butterfly in its mummy
Like a viol in its case
And the owl in its feathers
Like a doll in its lace.

Freezing dusk has tightened
Like a nut screwed tight
On the starry aeroplane
Of the hurtling night.
But the trout is in its hole
Like a giggle on a sleeper.
The hare strays down the highway
Like a root going deeper.
The snail is dry in the outhouse
Like a seed in a sunflower
The owl is pale on the gatepost
Like a clock on its tower.

Moonlight freezes the shaggy world
Like a mammoth of ice--
The past and the future
Are the jaws of a steel vice.
But the cod is in the tide-rip
Like the key in a purse.
The deer are on the bare-blown hill
Like smiles on a nurse.
The flies are behind the plaster
Like the lost score of a jig.
Sparrows are in the ivy-clump
Like money in a pig.

Such a frost
The freezing moon
Has losts her wits.

A star falls.

The sweating farmers
Turn in their sleep
Like oxen on spits.[10]

The first three stanzas are simply variations on a theme, with tradition fairly intact. By "variations on a theme," I

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[10]Ted Hughes, "The Warm and the Cold," New Poems 1973-74, (London: Hutchinson of London, 1974) 81-82.

mean that the poem is structurally sound with a common meter and a basic rhyme pattern of ABCB/DEFE/GHIH for each of the three stanzas and the last seven lines serving much the same function as would a final couplet. The couplet at the end uses spatial dynamics to bring out that "moment of human experience." As the one-syllable line "puts the poet's finger on the page like a pointer: 'here,'"[11] for Reg Saner, the single line "A star fell," positioned between components of the couplet makes the reader stop and concentrate on those three words rather than allowing the structure of the form to in any way obscure them.

Little of spatial free verse has yet to have had the opportunity to stand the test of time and become acknowledged as literature in a classic sense, but some work speaks for itself, in regard to effect. E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Guillaume Apollinaire are but a few who have successfully used this type of rhetoric with free verse. Much of what they say visually plays a major role in their poetry's total communication. "The Fish" by Marianne Moore begins,

The Fish

wade
through black jade.
  Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps

[11]Reg Saner, "Noble Numbers: Two in One," Ohio Review 28, (1982): 9.

adjusting the ash-heaps;
opening and shutting itself like

an
injured fan.
The barnacles which encrust the side
of the wave, cannot hide
there for the submerged shafts of the

sun,
split like spun
glass, move themselves with spotlight swiftness
into the crevices--
in and out, illuminating

the
turquoise sea
of bodies. The water drives a wedge
of iron through the iron edge
of the cliff; whereupon the stars,

pink
rice-grains, ink-
bespattered jellyfish, crabs like green
lilies, and submarine
toadstools, slide each on the other.

All
external
marks of abuse are present on this
defiant edifice--
all the physical features of

ac-
cident--lack
of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and
hatchet strokes, these things stand
out on it; the chasm side is

dead
Repeated
evidence has proved that it can live
on what can not revive
its youth. The sea grows old in it.[12]

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[12]Marianne Moore, "The Fish," The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore, (New York: The Macmillan Company/The Viking Press, 1981) 32-33.

Combining the artful use of the language with the recurrent pattern in the left-hand margin, Moore has created a backdrop illustrating the ebb and return of the sea. The poem itself fits into this backdrop and one form of rhetoric (visual) enhances the other (verbal). Apollinaire tells us that "Free verse gave wings to lyricism; but it was only one stage of the exploration that can be made in the domain of form."[13] Much of spatial free verse would be awkward, if not impossible, to use in traditional poetic forms. Cummings' poem "43" reads,

43

theys sO alive
(who is
?niggers)

Not jes
livin
not Jes alive But
So alive(they

s
born alive)
some folks aint born
somes born dead an
somes born alive(but

niggers
is
all
born
Alive)

ump-A-tum
;tee-die

[13]Guillaume Apollinaire, "The New Spirit and the Poets," The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982) 8.

uM-tuM
tidl
-id

umptyumpty(00----

!

ting
Bam-
:do)
,chippity.[14]

The colloquial (almost dialectical) tenor of the words would be difficult, if not impossible, to put into a more rigid or traditional format. Here he has lost many of the traditional boundaries, in order to write his poem in a quasi-dialect not usually thought of as poetic. As well as language,

> It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precision, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. . . . If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time.[15]

In place of meter or any other poetic structure that dictates the pace or the tone of the work, Cummings has used the spatial typography to provide much of the tone, and his colluialism dictates much of the meter. The majority of body of this poem (lines 4-17) makes a right-left movement;

[14]E. E. Cummings, "43," Complete Poems 1913-1962, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1968) 426.

[15]Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," American Poetic Theory, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. 1972) 339.

this appears to move backward, as the Southern-black slang of this poem might be considered "backward."

Further examples of this use of spatial-typography to provide meter, beyond that which punctuation provides, are seen in the work of Apollinaire:

The Farewell

I picked this spray of heather
Autumn is dead  remember
Never more on earth we two together
Breath of time  spray of heather
Remember I wait for you[16]

Apollinaire uses typographic-spatiality to visually show the reader the caesuras he wants the poem to be read with ("dead  remember" and "time  spray"). This dictating the way in which the poetry is read aloud also establishes the prosody of spatial free verse, because the reading is governed by the way the spatial poem is put on the page.[17]

This typographic-spatial kind of free verse moves beyond free verse and into structures of its own; as stated earlier, the poet is given the opportunity to establish that which for his own poetry will become "sanctioned practice" or "whim." Therefore, it is neither bound to the meter and rhyme of much of traditionally structured poetry nor is it bound by similar stanzaic conventions commonly seen in most

[16]Guillaume Apollinaire, "The Farewell," Alcools, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1965) 89.

[17]Hartman 14.

free verse. The spatial free verse poets have almost created a new genre that brings with it a flexibility that stretches to fit each poem. In the work of contemporary poet Sean O'Huigin, we find even page and horizontal line somewhat abandoned:

Aran Poems

dog
by the
sea side
dead dog
sea dog
fangs by
the tide bared
sea dog
lying
red skin is
skull tight
hole in
his red side
poor dog
the sea dog
gone the next
day

like some
prehistoric
caterpillar
the spine of
a great whale
lay upon the
seaweed
on the shore
upon the rocks

blues &
purples &
whites &
yellows &
pinks &
greens
three wrens in
a thorn bush
ceaseless

aran wind[18]

O'Huigin makes the strongest visual line run vertically. If read strictly horizontally, phrases are lost where the vertical lines overlap.

This style may not follow established poetic conventions, but it almost counts on/needs them to gain much of its effect. Poetry exercising horizontal minimalism, like "52" (Cummings) and "Aran Poems" (O'Huigin), would certainly not have the same effect on the reader if the reader expected it. West, in pointing out a weakness of spatial poetry, states, "It is a technique which depends on the habit of reading from left to right, of expecting the line to start at the left-hand margin, and so on."[19] If the reader was to be expecting the format/appearance/arrangement of the poem, some of the effect would be lost. The poet makes assumptions, regarding what the reader will be looking for when he comes to the particular page of poetry, and writes with that in mind. The poet is trying to use the typography as a kind of punctuation, possibly causing the words to take on a further meaning.[20] This could also

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[18]Sean O'Huigin, "Aran Poems," New Poems 1977-78, (London: Hutchinson of London 1977) 132.

[19]West 8.

[20]Eniko Bollobas and Akademiai Kiado, Tradition and Innovation in American Free Verse: Whitman to Duncan, (Budapest: 1986) 271.

become a pitfall for the spatial poet; the use of poetic typography must be accompanied by the same degree of ability as would traditionally structured poetry, or the poet may be avoiding one set of what he sees as limiting factors while establishing another set.

T. S. Eliot tells us, "There is in fact no conversational or other form which can be applied indiscriminately."[21] This is certainly the case when writing or analyzing typographic-spatial free verse. Any given type of poetry does not exist in a vacuum; to be fully understood or appreciated, it often must stand on a foundation of its use of the language. In "43" by Cummings, the vernacular he uses is at least as unorthodox as the visual structure, and since his use of the language is making a break with tradition, the reader isn't surprised when the visual structure does the same. In "The Warm and the Cold," by Ted Hughes, instead of the language matching the non-conformity of the spatiality, the artful use of metaphor quells any of the reader's discomfort with the poem's appearance, unorthodox to even free verse standards. With the reader's apprehension put aside, Hughes is then able to use the rhetoric of the poem's spatiality.

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[21]T. S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism, (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. 1967) 80.

In the following chapter, I demonstrate how this kind of free verse operates in tandem with the language of the poet.

## CHAPTER 3

## A READER-RESPONSE ANALYSIS

The expectations I brought as the reader to Ferlinghetti's A Coney Island of the Mind come from various levels, from literary to grammatical, as I will elaborate. What Stanley E. Fish refers to as "the form of the reader's experience, formal units,"[1] began for me on a decidedly non-poetic level. For the purpose of this analysis, I will be looking at Ferlinghetti's poetry from the perspective of a reader unfamiliar with typographic-spatial poetry.

As the reader confronted with a page of writing, I expect certain conventions. Of the conventions expected for poetry, I look first for common stanzaic poetry, accompanied by recurrent patterns of rhyme and meter. Poetry with these characteristics is not the type of poetry found in this collection by Ferlinghetti, so I look for a formal unit more basic than the stanza: The sentence. Once again I find but a few trappings of the expected unit. There are capitals where I might assume the beginning of a sentence or a phrase to be, but there is no accompanying punctuation to confirm that these are in fact sentences. I take another step even more basic, in terms of units of discourse, and find that even words are not always presented as expected. Words are

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[1]Stanley E. Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," Reader Response Criticism, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) 177.

occasionally run together, and terminology is often invented. Just as Coleridge tells us the reader must exercise a "suspension of disbelief,"[2] I, as a reader unfamiliar with Ferlinghetti's work, must suspend even structural expectations.

Much of the poetry in A Coney Island of the Mind is salted with the poetic convention of rhyme or many types of internal rhyme. Due to the conversational flow, or what Northrop Frye would call "associative rhythm,"[3] of Ferlinghetti's poetry, these are not as easily noticed as they would be were they accompanied by complementary metric structure. Although not read like traditionally structured poetry, Ferlinghetti's use of poetic convention (rhyme) is internalized, and it adds to the acceptance of his brand of typographic-spatial poetry.

An example of Ferlinghetti's work in A Coney Island of the Mind that I meet, as the reader, with the kind of response just given is "15."

15

Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads

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[2]Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, "Selections from Biographia Literaria," Criticism: The Major Statements (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975) 323.

[3]Northrop Frye, The Well-Tempered Critic, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963) 22.

of his audience
the poet like an acrobat
climbs on rime
to a high wire of his own making
and balancing on eyebeams
above a sea of faces
paces his way
to the other side of day
performing entrechats
and sleight-of foot tricks
and other high theatrics
and all without mistaking
any thing
for what it may not be

For he's the super realist
who must perforce perceive
taut truth
before the taking of each stance or step
in his supposed advance
toward that still higher perch
where Beauty stands and waits
with gravity
to start her death-defying leap

And he
a little charleychaplin man
who may or may not catch
her fair eternal form
spreadeagled in the empty air
of existence[4]

They rhyme at the end of lines 11 and 12 (way/day) is a common instance of the rhyme being nearly obscured by the rhythm of the poem. This poem being a description of the poet allows the reader to perceive more assonance, alliteration and even standard rhyme. If I am to accept what Ferlinghetti has to say about the poet, then I must feel as though there is some familiarity through which he

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[4]Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "15," A Coney Island of the Mind, (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1958) 30.

can communicate. This use of assonance, alliteration and rhyme can be observed in line seven ("climbs on rhyme"), line 20 ("who must perforce perceive"), line 21 ("taut truth") and line 22 ("before the taking of each stance or step"). Ferlinghetti has used these forms of rhyme to illustrate the poet; the reader is more willing to accept his verbal picture of the poet if that picture is accompanied by easily recognizable conventions of acknowledged poetry.

The different levels of metaphor that Ferlinghetti uses in "15" give three approaches for the reader to use in understanding Ferlinghetti's poetry. First the poet can be seen as an acrobat, then as a philosopher and finally as "a little charleychaplin man." Again I am presented with various views of the subject. The poet is referred to as a "super realist" in line 19, and just before that, in lines 16, 17 and 18, Ferlinghetti writes, "and all without mistaking/anything/for what it may not be." The word "anything" is split into two words, "any thing," which is read as emphasis for what seems to be Ferlinghetti's own position on who and what the poet is. The poet is shown to me, the reader, as a realist who perceives the truth and who stands high above me without ever making a wrong move on his advance toward beauty. Without the spatiality to put the

reader in a sympathetic position, Ferlinghetti's position would be easily put aside as too simplistic.

In "15," Ferlinghetti brings the poet to me in the metaphor of the acrobat. In this style of poetry, where standard convention is absent, common rules of interpretation do not always apply. In the first five lines of the poem, before I ever learn what the subject and the metaphor are (in lines 1-5), I have already employed primacy[5] to build somewhat of a picture of a type of daredevil that will become the poet, in Ferlinghetti's characterization.

I read the metaphor of the acrobat's performance three times in the course of this poem. The use of this metaphor leads to the assumption that what the performer is doing is done for the pleasure of the audience. Not only is the poet performing <u>for</u> the audience (the reader), but he is performing with the audience waiting to pass judgement as to whether or not his performance was acceptable. For the poet to perform for/to the reader, he has put himself in a place of extreme vulnerability. From the first two lines, I assume a sympathetic stance toward the poet, because I am told that what he does is risky and for the purpose of my entertainment.

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[5]Jonathan Culler, "Literary Competence," <u>Reader Response Criticism</u>, ed. Jane P. Tompkins, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) 102.

The next metaphor that I read lets me know that the area of performance--though for my benefit/entertainment--is upon the poet's own ground. I am told that this is a "high wire of his own making." I easily accept this provision the poet makes for himself because Ferlinghetti has prefaced this by telling me that to get there, the poet "climbs on rhyme." Though still not written in a visually familiar form, my discomfort with this break from tradition is quelled by the recognition of a familiar poetic convention. Due to this pacifying of my discomfort over form (by the familiarity of convention), I am willing to allow the poet what I am told is his own territory (the "high wire of his own making" becomes allowable for both the written poet and the writing poet). This allowance is further enhanced by the next two lines (9-10). I interpret the "eyebeams" as my own scrutiny of the poet's work, and the "sea of faces" are those of the literate community. The image built in my mind now gives further license to the poet and in turn to Ferlinghetti, who presents the poet to me.

The lines that read, "all without mistaking/any thing/ for what it may not be" are placed at the conclusion of a description of the poet's performance. The placement of those lines (16-18) is tactical on the part of Ferlinghetti; after a flawless performance, I would be willing to let an acrobat take his bows, and that same allowance is

transferred to Ferlinghetti. This transfer is accomplished because the acrobat is also the poet, representing Ferlinghetti.

The assumptions that Ferlinghetti bases "15" on up until this point have been innocuous enough that accepting them (even tentatively) is not difficult to do from my perspective as the reader. I am now receptive for lines 19-21. If the poem would have begun with this assertion--that the poet is the super realist--I would have no reason to be convinced of that statement's validity. At this point enough groundwork has been laid and enough development has taken place for the poem to have established a degree of integrity. If I've, for whatever reason, allowed the poet to call himself a "super realist," the next claim he makes will come even easier to accept.

Ferlinghetti saying that the poet <u>perceives</u> the <u>truth</u> is a rather bold statement that might have given me reason to balk, but he makes that statement on a backdrop of another poetic convention: Alliteration. The acceptance of this idea sets up the written poet as being on some higher level of consciousness. Once the poet's perceiving the truth is allowed for, Ferlinghetti strategically casts just the slightest doubt on the poet's own certainty. Here the poet's "advance" is referred to as "supposed." As the reader, I see this as comforting. If the poet can be

doubted, then I can see him as fallible and no better than myself. Since Ferlinghetti has himself cast this shadow of doubt, I, the reader, am put on the defensive in the poet's favor. The word "supposed," however, also brings with it the feeling of inevitability, which puts me in the position of almost expecting the "advance."

This "supposed advance" is "toward that still higher perch," which denotes to me a superiority to the poet's prior stance. I accept this almost altruistic characterization of the poet, because the struggle to reach perfection is a common human characteristic.

In the next line (25), the word "Beauty" capitalized takes the position of a name. "Beauty" is also clearly what the poet is trying to reach with his words. The importance of "Beauty" is further elevated for me by the fact that it stands and waits "with gravity."

When, in line 27, "Beauty" is assigned a gender, I move back to the acrobat image where "Beauty" begins to be seen as a female partner in a circus acrobatic act. With "Beauty" making her "death-defying leap," I now find "Beauty" on the same level as the poet: "Risking absurdity/and death." In this new way of viewing the poet's act, the poet (written and writing) takes a position as being allied with "Beauty."

The last segment of the poem (lines 28-33) brings me to a place where I can see the poet's humility once again (lines 28-30), so that in the last three lines Ferlinghetti can leave the reader to decide whether or not the poet did catch the "fair eternal form" of "Beauty." The fact that she is "spread-eagled in the empty air" lets me see her further vulnerability to the poet, and the fact that the poet will be saving her, in her "death-defying leap," makes me want the poet to succeed in his attaining "Beauty." Ferlinghetti also portrays beauty as he does to show me that beauty is not obtainable without a degree of studied ability and struggle. The characterization of "Beauty" also lacks a great deal of definition; this makes me define "Beauty" in my own terms, which in turn amplifies my acceptance of the statement that Ferlinghetti is making.

Before I have even read "15," certain elements of the poem's rhetoric are perceived. Typographically, the poem has a constant movement, which prepares me for the literary movement <u>within</u> the poem. "15" has a cascading appearance as its movement goes from left to right. The first ten lines carry this movement as well as lines 19-32. The cascading effect moves from left to right, and from top to bottom, in a decidedly diagonal direction, giving the printed poem the appearance of movement. The side-to-side

movement causes me to see the entire poem much like the acrobat's performance.

Lines 11-18 break this visual movement by every other line beginning at the same point and crowding the shifting lines into the left two thirds of the page. The movement compacted into these eight lines gives a description of the acrobat's studied precision ("paces his way/to the other side of day;performing entrechats/and slight-of-foot tricks/ and other high theatrics"). The movement of these lines being far more compact, as well as the outlining of the precision, gives me a feeling of convention that is fortified by Ferlinghetti's use of rhyme in this portion ("way/day" and "tricks/theatrics"). This feeling caused by the typography and the sense of rhyme is what allows Ferlinghetti to assert that the poet doesn't mistake "any thing/for what it may not be." This is the only portion of "15" that appears to be slightly static, and by the assertions in regards to the poet's precision being placed within this structure, I find myself even more prone to perceive it as truth.

The last set of lines (28-33) breaks the left-right, cascading, visual movement of the poem by not completing the motion. The literary movement is broken as well, because I am never satisfied by knowing if the poet is able to attain his aspiration of catching "Beauty." Visually, the poem is

not doing what is expected, while at the same time not filling expectations of the content. This leaves me as the reader in the position of finishing the final thought left unfinished in the context of the poem, both visual and literary. The visual image has an obvious completion, and it seems natural for me to conclude that "Beauty" has also been caught.

Formally, "15" differs from many in A Coney Island of the Mind in that many of them are quite geometrical in their shape. Some are laid out on the page in what appears as blocks of words or lines forming distinct outlines. The reason that "15" stands out as different is that it looks and/or is so much more organic. The growing appearance of "15" is one of the non-verbal techniques that Ferlinghetti uses to bring my understanding of this poem into the same light from which he sees it. Without making me read an argument in favor of his view, I am persuaded nonetheless.

Rosemarie Waldrop sets up a dichotomy between what is "read" and what is "seen."[6] In all poetry, when what is seen begins to affect what is read, what is seen virtually becomes a part of that which is read and takes on rhetorical qualities of its own. Ferlinghetti has used the visual rhetoric to bolster the verbal rhetoric. In doing this

[6]Rosemarie Waldrop, "A Basis of Concrete Poetry," The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981) 315.

artfully, he is able to convey not only an image, but a mood, a feeling and an impression that go beyond the verbal.

# CHAPTER 4

## APPLICATION

Recently, I've been finding some interesting alliances between typographic-spatial free verse and the teaching of English composition. Also, I've always suspected that free verse aided me in my understanding of certain rhetorical aspects of composition; my suspicions have been proving true, as I've been using typographic-spatial free verse in my teaching.

More and more, I find that one of the English composition students' greatest problems (with writing and reading analytically) is fear. From the student who is intimidated by the immensity of the blank page to the student who fears revision because he sees his work as inspired, fear runs the entire gamut of composition. I've always imagined that my anxieties over composition and the rhetoric therein were allayed greatly by my reading and writing free verse. I've supposed that the spatiality of some free verse was, for me, a less threatening method of expressing rhetoric. Before I read a poem constructed using typographic-spatial free verse, I already had some idea of what the writer was trying to say. If the poem was whimsical, the poem appeared whimsical in its physical construction. Whimsey could be achieved by the lines of the poem being printed on the page in an unusual yet definite

pattern. This type of typographic-spatial arrangement can be seen in poems like Cummings' "43" (printed in chapter two). If the lines of a poem were unusually long, containing a seemingly inordinant number of words, it might have given me the unconscious impression that the poem was brimming with its content, and my expectation was that I would find layers of meaning, or multiple meanings in the poetic images and metaphors. I expected a series of short lines to give me concise and to-the-point information. In these ways, I was able to enter the process without fearing total ignorance of what the poet was trying to say. The spatiality of some free verse expressed to me its rhetoric in different ways that were more obvious to me: Visually, the poem on the page gave me what other forms of writing only gave through their words.

I propose that typographic-spatial free verse, combining that which can be expressed verbally with that which can be expressed visually, has properties that aid in the teaching of composition.

I was teaching an introductory course that preceded the standard, college freshman-level composition class. In an assignment I had given the class, I passed out a page of free verse: Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "16" from A Coney Island of the Mind. Like many poems in that collection, "16" is mostly unpunctuated, although it uses a great deal

of typographic-spatiality as a rhetorical device. In instructed the class to restructure the poem into a grammatically sound paragraph of prose. I did allow them the freedom to add words if necessary. At the onset, I pointed out to the class that the typographic structure of the poem might provide clues as to what type of grammar the line might require. I also told them to assume that the poet had a conscious reason for writing what he did in the particular way in which he wrote, with regard to both the words themselves and the way in which they were printed on the page.

In fulfilling the assignment, the students added very few words, and many were pushed to use grammatical structures they were unfamiliar with. For some, the assignment proved to be helpful in their understanding of composition.

The quotes in these case studies are the words of the respective students.

## Courtney

The first of the four students I will use as examples is Courtney. In many ways, Courtney was a typical college freshman: She was quick to express that she was in college "to learn," but by no means did she seem ready to sacrifice having a "great time" <u>for</u> that learning. In her work, I had begun to notice that she was having a great deal of trouble

understanding parenthetical phrasing. Using commas to set apart a nonrestrictive clause was difficult for Courtney to grasp.

Courtney pointed out to me that it seemed to her the poet had often set phrases apart from the bulk of the poem or given them lines of their own instead of using commas. These set-apart phrases, she noticed, could be "pulled out" without effecting the overall structure of the poem. It was a fairly simple shift from tis to an understanding of parenthetical phrasing.

Later in the day that the assignment was turned in, I happened to see Courtney on campus. She told me that even if she hadn't done very well she really enjoyed working with what she referred to as, "that type of poetry." She went on to tell me that that was the way poetry "should really be written." As far as she was concerned, the spatial placement was "a lot easier to understand than most of the grammar." For Courtney, the typographic-spatial techniques actually helped bridge a gap between what she already understood and something that I was trying to teach her. Through what she was able to perceive visually she was able to understand a structural part of composition. Courtney was not an "A" student, but her particular insight into the spatiality of free verse helped her understand one of the uses for a basic component of composition: The comma.

## Todd

I had hoped that the spatiality of the free verse that I was using in this assignment might prove in some way useful with Todd, another of my students. Todd is dyslexic, and I thought that the typographic-spatial free verse might be helpful, by allowing the eye freer movement down the page. Also, a page of prose is usually much denser than a page of spatial free verse like Ferlinghetti's; I assumed that fewer words on the page would make reading easier for a dyslexic reader. Sadly, this proved to be far from the case with Todd. He found the page of fairly diffuse free verse was even more difficult to read. He went on to explain, "It almost feels like reading backwards. It only complicates reading, because I lose my place." Todd also found that he often read a group of lines over and over again, because he had a hard time keeping his eyes from "wandering in the white space."

Though the work with Todd was unsuccessful in aiding with his reading, it did help in that it defined the common ground that these case studies work on: That which is seen and its interaction with that which is read. In the other case studies, focus is easily lost--literally can take the place of visual. My work with Todd always brought me back into focus, because his dyslexia is a visual problem. If it was impossible for Todd to read the words but he could still

see the way in which the lines were placed on the page, he might have been able to have begun building some mental image of the poem, but when Todd tried to look at the page of writing and make sense out of it, it all blurred. He might have been able to look at the page and see the written lines as drawn lines, but he could not keep his eyes from seeing the words as words.

Gina

Gina was an upper-division composition student. A junior in the English department, she was trying to more fully understand the rhetoric of her own writing. Gina was working with me independently, and I asked her to try an assignment similar to the assignment I had given in my introductory class.

Before reading Ferlinghetti's "16," she told me that the visible structure of the poem gave her the feeling that it was more regimented, because the short lines "move from right to left and back again--almost like marching." For Gina, reading the text was a confirmation of what the poem had already told her visually. She also commented that the appearance of the poem set a "mood," by the way in which it was laid out on the page. She then took it a step further and said that she couldn't help but compare what she <u>saw</u> in Ferlinghetti's poetry to the type of foreshadowing used by

writers of prose. She asked, "Now, how do I do that with only words?"

Gina seemed determined to use that type of effect in her own writing of prose, and as I worked with her further, she began to learn how to choose her words for their specific effect on the reader. She was learning that she could manipulate a reader's reaction to the writing by choosing words that brought with them certain color or mood.

Gail

Gail was a fairly good student in a standard freshman composition class, however she did not like to think of herself as "a reader." Structurally, her writing was sound, although it was not exceptionally creative. In other words, her grammar was well-studied, but writing held little interest for her beyond a technical level. She referred to herself as a "concrete person."

When asked to read a piece of traditionally rhymed and metered poetry aloud, Gail found it quite difficult not to read it "sing-songish." When given a page of E. E. Cummings, however, she said that the poem "opened up" to her. Gail read several of Cummings' poems and told me that a few poems by Cummings that appeared to be more traditionally structured, with stanzas and fairly uniform lines, didn't strike her as worthwhile to read. When I pursued that claim, I was told that the typographic-spatial

poetry of Cummings didn't "seem as threatening." With it being so obviously different from other types of writing, she told me, "I can read it for the meaning and not for the writing itself." In further conversation, I learned what she meant by that comment. Gail felt as though much of writing was weighted down by conventions, formats and rules. She was convinced that writers didn't often say what they meant, because they were too tightly bound by those conventions, formats and rules. Knowing that neither this poetry nor her interpretation of it were bound by any of the common poetic conventions, she was willing to take the challenge of understanding the poetry. "I'm just reading it the way it looks on the page."

It's interesting to make mention that since my introducing Gail to typographic-spatial free verse, she has become quite a fan of Ferlinghetti, Apollinaire and Moore.

# CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

The idea that typographic-spatial free verse holds some distinct significance rhetorically is obviously not a new one, as can be seen from the second chapter. The concrete poets might have overstated the case in the late 60's, but current free verse poets have only begun to use the rhetoric of free verse spatiality. That rhetoric which is seen goes before that which is read, and in many cases that which is read is also colored by that which is seen.

In chapter three, I have also illustrated one of my secondary premises: Typographic-spatial free verse works most effectively from the vantage of a distinct critical perspective. The variation of interpretation on a given poem's spatiality is almost limitless as the poem is analyzed from each new critical perspective.

My intention in writing the fourth chapter was to analyze possible ways in which typographic-spatiality can aid in the teaching of composition and rhetoric. Though my intention is to but show the significance of typographic-spatiality, there is obviously much farther that can be gone in the area of practical usage, both in and out of the English composition/rhetoric classroom. However, I have worked to establish a foundation for typographic-spatiality to stand upon. This foundation allows typographic-spatiality to be seen as having more facets for use as a

tool--not just an embellishment for the free verse poet to use.

In chapter four, the case of Courtney sheds light on the words of Charles Olson, quoted in chapter two. Olson saying that free verse typographic-spatiality can "indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. . ."[1] is illustrated somewhat by Courtney's finding in free verse help to understand certain grammatic constructions. The spatial poetry shows her what the grammar is intending to do. That which is seen bridges the gap between that which is read and that which is understood.

Also in chapter four, Gina helps to bridge that same gap between that which is read and that which is understood, but she does so with regard to the writer's use of rhetoric. Her struggle to do rhetorically what the typographic-spatial poet does visually in a sense counters Paul West's words quoted in chapter two:

> One function of stanza form is to confer upon a poet's lines an air of finality and inevitability. A poet writing free verse will often find that his line endings lack significance and trenchancy.[2]

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[1]Olson 339.

[2]West 8.

What Gina saw on the page certainly brought, for her, a sense of inevitability to the poem when it "set a mood" for her as the reader. The "finality and inevitability" that West attributes to the stanza form came to Gina in the rhetoric of the poem's visual appearance, and the "significance and trenchancy" West claims that free verse is often lacking is easily found when the rhetoric is not confined to the words alone, but is seen in the typographic-spatial construction as well.

If the poet is to be allowed "any or every verbal or rhetorical device which experience has shown capable of creating emotion in the reader,"[3] then Gail is the most dramatic example of this. To her, the typographic-spatial poetry of E. E. Cummings presented itself as a challenge. Thus challenged, Gail was willing to leave any of her misgivings about reading poetry. Though not considering herself "a reader," the typographic-spatiality used by some writers of free verse "charged" the poetry and allowed Gail to not only understand the poetry, but to enjoy it as well. That which was seen by Gail allayed her discomfort with the genre and allowed her to understand what the poet was saying.

The case studies in chapter four and the reader-response analysis in chapter three serve to illustrate the

[3]Mandel 239.

properties of typographic-spatial free verse given in chapter two. The often sub-conscious effects that typographic-spatial free verse can have on the reader and the rhetorical techniques that the typographic-spatial poets use in their writing serve a myriad of purposes. The writer is given another avenue through which he or she may more precisely express that which words alone cannot express. For the individual student reader, typographic-spatial free verse may quell anxieties or even provide a new understanding that can aid him or her in the learning process.

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